BEYOND ADMISSION TEST DEBATE

Re-imagining school access, equity

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THE government's decision to abolish the lottery-based school admission system and re-introduce admission tests from the 2027 academic year has re-ignited an important national debate about fairness, merit and access. At one level, the move appears to respond to a widely shared concern that random selection cannot adequately assess a child's readiness for schooling. Yet, beneath this policy shift lies a more complex and uncomfortable question: are we addressing the real problem or merely replacing one imperfect system with another?

For several years, the lottery system had been used to allocate seats in government schools, especially in urban areas, where demand far exceeds available places. While the proposed return of entrance examinations may seem like a logical corrective, the debate extends far beyond administrative procedures. It touches on issues of equity, educational philosophy and the structural inequalities embedded within the education system.

The lottery system was introduced at a time when school admissions had become highly competitive and deeply stressful for families. Before its implementation, many reputed schools required admission tests even for the earliest classes, placing immense pressure on children as young as six or seven. Parents, eager to secure admission into prestigious institutions, often turned to coaching centres and private tutors months or even years in advance.

In such a system, success was rarely determined solely by a child's ability or readiness. Instead, it was shaped by the financial capacity, social awareness and networks available to their families. Admission became less about learning and more about preparation for competition.

Against this backdrop, the lottery system was introduced as an equalising mechanism. By allocating seats through a transparent random process, it aimed to provide every child with an equal chance of admission, regardless of background. For many, it reduced the psychological burden on young children and shifted attention away from early academic competition.

Despite its intentions, the lottery system was not without critics. Some argued that it undermined the principle of merit by relying on chance rather than performance. Others believed that it limited schools' ability to select students who were academically prepared. For many parents, the idea that admission depended on luck rather than effort was difficult to accept, particularly after investing time and resources in their children's early learning.

These concerns have clearly influenced the government's decision to move away from the lottery system. However, replacing it with admission tests risks re-introducing many of the very problems the lottery was designed to address.

One of the most immediate consequences of re-introducing admission tests is the likely resurgence of the coaching culture. When examinations determine access to reputed schools, demand for coaching inevitably rises. Specialised centres emerge to prepare children for these tests and parents often feel compelled to enrol their children simply to remain competitive.

This dynamic creates a cycle of inequality. Families with greater financial resources can invest in extensive preparation, giving their children a significant advantage. Meanwhile, children from lower-income households, already constrained by limited access to educational support, find themselves further marginalised.

In Bangladesh, where households already bear a substantial proportion of education costs, the return of admission tests is likely to intensify financial pressure. What is presented as a merit-based system may, in reality, reward access to resources rather than ability. In this sense, admission tests risk reinforcing existing disparities rather than reducing them.

Beyond issues of access and inequality, there are critical developmental considerations. Early childhood is widely recognised as a period for exploration, play and holistic development. Introducing competitive examinations at this stage can fundamentally distort the learning experience.

When very young children are subjected to formal tests, the focus of education often shifts from curiosity and creativity to memorisation and performance. The joy of learning is replaced with anxiety and education becomes associated with pressure rather than discovery.

If admission tests are to be re-introduced, they must be fundamentally re-imagined. For early classes, assessments should be observational rather than academic, focusing on readiness skills such as communications, motor coordination and the ability to follow instructions. The process should resemble guided interaction rather than a high-stakes examination.

The expansion of coaching culture remains one of the most troubling consequences of examination-based admission. Coaching centres thrive in competitive environments, often reducing education to test-taking strategies and predictable outcomes. In doing so, they undermine broader educational goals such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional development.

Addressing this challenge requires more than policy statements. It demands strict regulation of exploitative practices, particularly where teachers are involved in private coaching linked to admission. At the same time, schools must ensure an equitable access to preparatory support so that children are not disadvantaged by their economic background.

The intensity of competition for school admission is not simply a product of admission mechanisms. It reflects a deeper structural challenge: the uneven distribution of quality across the education system.

In many urban areas, a small number of institutions are widely perceived as ‘top schools,’ often because of better infrastructure, more experienced teachers and stronger academic outcomes. As a result, thousands of families compete for a limited number of seats in these institutions each year.

This pressure will persist regardless of whether admission is based on lotteries or examinations. As long as disparities in quality remain, parents will continue to seek access to a handful of reputed schools and children will continue to bear the burden of that competition.

One potential pathway forward lies in strengthening neighbourhood-based schooling. Expanding catchment area policies, where children are prioritised for schools within their local communities, could reduce both logistical challenges and admission pressure.

Such an approach, widely used in many countries, encourages stronger school-community relationships and reduces the need for long commutes. However, for this model to succeed, it must be accompanied by sustained investment in improving the quality of local schools. Without this, zoning risks becoming another administrative measure that fails to address underlying inequalities.

The government has indicated that stakeholder consultations will take place before finalising the new admission system. This is a welcome step, but its effectiveness will depend on the depth and inclusiveness of the process.

Meaningful consultation must go beyond formality. It should include educators, child development experts, parents and representatives from marginalised communities. More important, it must be grounded in evidence and a willingness to adapt policy based on that evidence.

Education reform carries long-term consequences. Without careful design and genuine engagement, even well-intentioned policies can produce unintended outcomes.

Are we solving the wrong problem? At its core, the current debate risks focusing on the wrong question. The issue is not simply how to select students for a limited number of good schools. The real challenge is how to ensure that all schools provide quality education.

If systemic disparities persist, competition will continue regardless of the admission mechanism. Re-introducing admission tests may create an appearance of meritocracy, but without addressing structural inequities, it is unlikely to produce meaningful change.

In fact, it may deepen existing divides.

This policy shift represents an important moment of choice. Bangladesh can either revert to familiar but flawed practices or use this opportunity to pursue deeper, systemic reform.

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Designing a fair and child-friendly admission system is important, but it must be part of a broader vision which treats education as a public good rather than a competitive marketplace.

Ultimately, the goal should be clear: to create an education system where every child, regardless of background, has access to meaningful learning opportunities in an environment that nurtures curiosity, creativity, and human potential.

If approached with courage and clarity, this moment could mark the beginning of a more equitable and humane education system. If not, it risks becoming yet another cycle of reform that changes the process but leaves the problem untouched.

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Geographic Reference